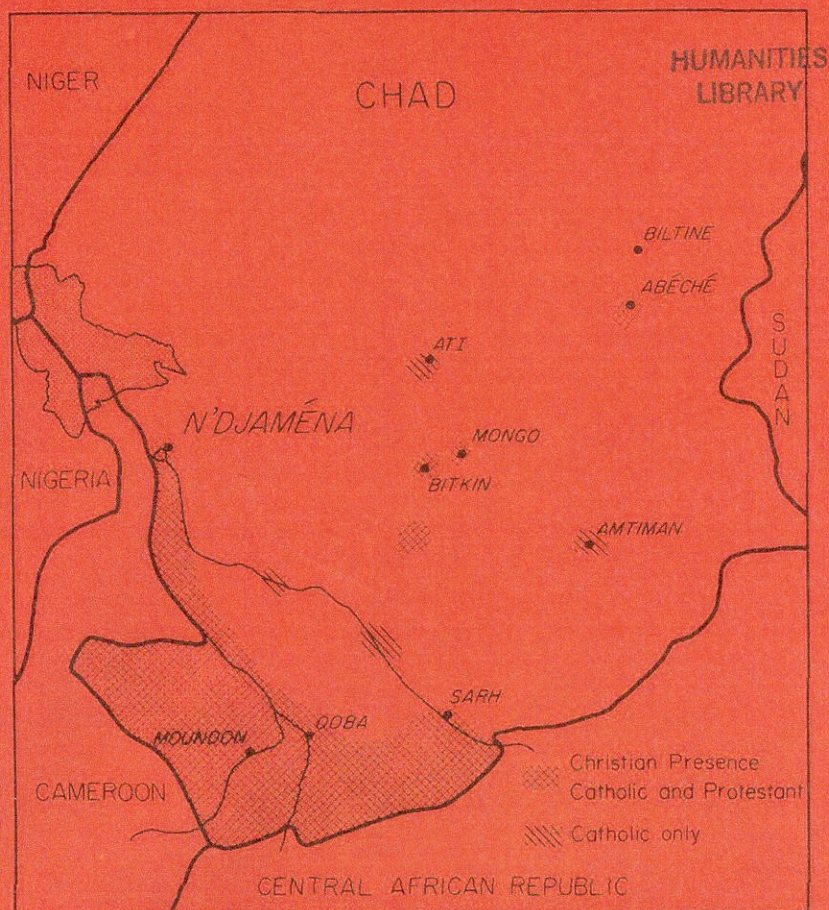


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CHRISTIANS IN CHAD

Responding to God, Responding to War

By GEORGES CHÈVRE

CALIFORNIA
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A Maasai Looks at the
Ecology of Maasailand

Tepilit Ole Saitoti

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George Chèvre

A plaster made from the clay-rich soil of the Baguirmi region was used by villagers to decorate the walls of their church. Smearing the paste over a section of the altar, they repeated designs their parents knew before the advent of mission work.

Sixty people, the entire population of the village, assembled on Sunday. They waited for the pastor, who had come from the capital to visit his far-flung congregation. As he entered, the women's chorus began a traditional song of praise for a chief, inserting the pastor's name into the formula. Ready to preach, the pastor declared that he could see the Bible represented in the geometric pattern of the mural and Jesus in the eyeless face that stared back at him.

Fragmented like an exploded artillery shell, Chad is a mosaic of languages, people, economic tensions and private armies. In this disunity, leaders, pastors, traditional rulers, government ministers, Islamic teachers, guerillas and an educated elite attempt to form coalitions to control at least their immediate interests. Symbols and stories prove to be flexible building blocks of power.

The Lutheran village church expresses many Chadian dilemmas. It, like the sorghum fields around it, belongs to the communal care of the community. All the men are farmers and craftsmen; the women are cooks and nurses. They constructed it out of the same sun-dried mud and straw bricks used by generations for their round huts. The roof is a loose thatch of local grasses supported by a tight weave of the leaves of palm trees. It is these trees that encircle the church, the dwellings, and several granaries before the land grades into the flood plain of the Chari River.

The green tranquility of the pastoral scene stands side-by-side with other Chadian realities. A move to the capital would cost more than a 100 kg. sack of grain for one of the village families. The trip is a more frequent occasion for the church supported minister. This mobility aids him in his work of evangelizing people who practice ancestral cults. Yet, it is precisely this modernity afforded him which brings him into contact with the shocking contrasts of life in Chad. Once a busy seat of both government and private business, N'Djaména resembles a desert. The reasons go beyond the drought and bad land management which have resulted in deforestation of the surrounding countryside.

For its residents, the capital city has a popular geography. Each member of society becomes an historian. The body of this work of retelling past events grows every time people gather around the huge aluminum tubs of millet beer and begin, "I remember in February of '80 how Habré's troops fanned out across that

open field over there to take the radio station." To the initiated, each damaged building is a testament to streetfighting that claimed the life of a son who joined one of the factions or an aunt who went out of the concession too soon and was met by a stray bullet.

N'Djaména has known many kinds of destruction: mortar attacks, tank blasts, rifle fire, and the pillaging by small bands of soldiers and thieves that continue to this day. Now entire neighborhoods lie vacant or half-occupied. The mud brick housing that typifies local construction is too fragile to withstand the violence the city has experienced.

Another element plays into the situation of homelessness. The mud houses must be replastered every three or four rainy seasons. With the state of upheaval that has been constant since 1979, this has not been done. Decayed walls, pitted by sudden rain storms that come in June, July, and August, and eaten from the inside by termites and beetles, collapse regularly, leaving more people to seek shelter with already overcrowded relatives. Tin roofs of a friend's concession, riddled with bullet holes, provide little protection.

On June 7, 1982, the capital that Hisséin Habré, chief of which the Forces Armées du Nord (now the Forces Armées Nationales Tchadiennes) officially took control, was largely evacuated. Certainly the southerner population, which thought it had more to fear from the northern leader than most, had left the capital en masse. They were refugees in northern Cameroun, Borno State, Nigeria, or had fled further south to their home villages in Chad.

Seeking national unity and trying to reestablish a precarious balance between northern and southern influence in government, Habré has sought to reassemble the rudiments of a state bureaucracy, an integrated army, and an economic and social base to life. To this end, he has rewarded his trustworthy companions in war, and has attempted to recruit new talent. He has also sought to assuage the fears of those who have been personally affected by the war and to deal with incidents of torture, ethnic genocide, and the immense destruction of recent years.

Habré can point to a cabinet of northerners and southerners, to an upswing of small commerce in N'Djaména and throughout the south, to sugar and cotton production near national needs, and to international recognition of his government as claim of success. Critics will cite an internecine struggle in the north, now exacerbated by the intervention of Libya, France, Zaire, and the United States, continued guerilla activity in the south, and the imprisonment and torture of political opponents to demonstrate the weakness of the government. But how have individual Chadians, perhaps those pastored by the Lutheran preacher, responded to the recent history of their country?

"We are tired of war." With these words, a Chadian Christian in Paris summarizes the situation at home. His perspective is that of a Western educated, Francophone Chadian who has long served in government.

This man received an invitation from the new government to return home and take up an administrative post. Instead, he looked for ways to continue his studies in France. Past political involvements may not be forgotten.

The pragmatism of his conclusion marks the attitude of much of the edu-

cated elite today. They realize that continued warfare can only worsen their situation.

For many, Catholic mission schools and Protestant churches provided access to practical training in France and, later, incorporation into the government and public service. Their position vis-à-vis the Habré government, which some regard as hostile to southern Christians, is ambiguous.

In the past, Christians, if not the churches themselves, have played a key role in the political system. Though neither he nor his church would be claimed by most Christians today, the President at the time of independence, N'Garta Tombalbaye, came from a Pentecostal assembly and involved the state in church affairs.

The colonial, and later Chadian administrations, which governed the northern, Moslem "arabophone" — parts of the country with French judicial systems in the French language — drew people from the missions and churches. This imposition of political authority coming from the south to the north reversed traditional patterns of dominance (dramatized in the Arabic-colonial trade in slaves) which ran from the French and the independent government of Chad and engendered resentment among the Arabic-speaking people. This intensified the conflicts which splinter the Chadian people along linguistic, geographical and religious lines. These conflicts continue and exist alongside the ideological and geopolitical factors said to control the Chado-Libyan war of 1983.

Many of these divisions fall along "tribal lines," a term accepted by nearly all Chadians to express the ethnic conflicts in their country. This is manifest among northerners, between those who are Gorane-speaking and those who are Arabic-speaking, and among the 200 or more different language groups in the south.

The most stereotyped "tribal" dispute in Chad is that between "northerners" and "southerners." In an ethnographical sense, the terms are useless. Yet in the politics of Chad, they express a distrust which separates the country. The falling out between the two groups accounts for the thick bush around several major towns in the south. It was cited by Habré as a major reason for his pull-out from the Malloum government in which he served as Prime Minister.

Nevertheless, in the recent years of the war, this strain has been overshadowed by the split between northerners themselves. This was climaxed in March of 1980 by the falling out of Goukouni Weddaye (now serving as Chef de l'Etat in exile of the Gouvernement d'Union Nationale de Transistion) and Habré. The end of their coalition government brought Habré's FANT into open conflict with GUNT forces.

Both Habré and Goukouni are sons of the extreme northern province — the Borkou-Ennedi-Tibesti in the Sahara desert. Indeed, at no point has the extended civil war in Chad taken on a distinctly religious character. It has not been a battle between Christians and Moslems. Despite the engagement of Libyan leader Khaddafi on the side of the GUNT, it has not been a campaign for Moslem fundamentalism.

As a result, Christians, like the man in Paris, have held posts in all Chadian

governments. Today, Christians participate in the war from both sides. The FANT government has made an effort to include people who have long been in Chadian administration such as Agriculture Minister Djigdingar. Militarily, the FANT army has sought counsel from such prominent Christians as the General Odingar. Christians serve as soldiers in positions of command as well as infantry. The GUNT has southern officers of Christian background, such as the General Djojo. The support is diverse. There are Islamic factions. There are also separatist supporters of a "Cotton Republic." And, finally, the southern groups of Karmougué's army.

Official church response to the war has been moving toward a strict neutrality. There were some early endorsements by some church groups of various factions. A woman's auxiliary paraded around Karmougué's command center to sing his praises in the traditional way. Since the establishment of the Habré government, the churches have been careful to steer a course independent of any political involvement. Left to choose, Christians serve the government or enter a rebel group with little or no guidance from the church. These decisions are made more on the basis of ethnic history, family ties, or promises of personal advancement.

Under the secular state that Habré is forming today, some measure of church freedom seems assured. With the current French military underwriting of the N'Djaména government, more individuals who took exile in France and neighboring African countries may return.

The bureaucracy is a key factor in the Habré government. Since this cadre is to a large extent composed of southerners, it is essential to maintaining a political consensus. The key to this support seems to be the payment of salaries. Currently, only half-salaries are being paid. In the capital, these come fairly regularly while in the provinces the pay channels are less sure. Yet, with this minimal infrastructure, the government is able to function and provide basic services. The major towns are defended by FANT or foreign troops. They have water and electricity. An inoculation program for cattle against hoof-and-mouth disease was carried out in the ranching regions of the east with the help of international agencies. Rudimentary health care is provided at a community level.

But in a country so completely absorbed in war, no part of government is affected. Political propaganda plays a key role in creating public morale. Parades of support for the FANT are organized in many towns by the popular committees of the FANT. Military hardware and soldiers are present everywhere in N'Djaména. The bureaucracy is itself not beyond military significance.

When Pierre tells you his name he gives both the Chadian name of his father and the one he received at baptism. He lives in N'Djaména and the sign of his hard work over his fifty years is that he has been able to put a tin roof on his house. His yard boasts a flock of chickens and two goats. As a clerk in the public service, he occupies an uncommon spot in the social network of the capital. He might be considered "middle class." What he cannot buy is security. Though for the moment he has the means to feed his family of seven children, several nephews who depend on him for their education, and grandparents, he has no

way to assure their future. Bank accounts are only for the very rich and all he can do is lay in a sack or two of grain in his home village. His wife will go there to look after their field during the growing season.

At the time of the recent capture of Abéché (the major town in north-eastern Chad) by GUNT forces, the government sent letters to workers in several ministries telling them of the defense plans for N'Djaména. Civil servants would be enlisted in a militia. Pierre was asked to make himself available for military service. After receiving the letter he was silent for some time. Does a half-salary buy this kind of loyalty to one's government? The spoken word is considered more important than what is written when Chadians gather together. Finally, he ironized to his friends, "I hope they give us some training before sending us to the front. I've never fought before."

Survival in tenuous situations is a Chadian skill. Many of the Chadian Christians learned it during the "Initiation Affair" under president N'Garta Tombalbaye. Chad's first president after independence increasingly centralized authority during his years in power. In a pattern since repeated by such rulers as Jean Bedel Bokassa and Idi Amin, Tombalbaye attempted to place all aspects of life under his personal authority in a totalitarian form of government. His validation of this approach was the traditional chief system known to Chadians in their village societies where one man dominated. This "big man" arrangement, applied to national government without traditional limits, proved murderous.

In the "Initiation Affair," the President wanted to impose the traditional form of tribal initiation into adulthood on every adolescent in Chad. To conform, himself, to this "Africanization," Tombalbaye dropped the name "Francois" and replaced it with "N'Garta." In the whispered tones in which this period of history is always talked about, he is known simply as "N'Garta." The name still inspires awe, respect, fear.

At the time of Tombalbaye's attempt to regulate this crucial period of life across the entire society, there already existed a corps of Chadian pastors and catechists. Many of these saw the tribal rites as idolatrous. In sermons, Tombalbaye was cast as the devil who had been given control over this world. Christians gave their lives in resistance to this intervention in their affairs.

The young men and women who grew up during this time learned lessons from it that gave them a wisdom unexpected in their age. This man's family compound is surrounded by the ripening stalks of red millet that grow during the humid rainy season in Moundou. The vine of a squash plant crawls over the thatch roof of his hut. Now, with adolescent children of his own, he explains, "If you can foresee a difficulty on the horizon for you and your family, you are obligated to find a way around it. You owe it to your family, for their future, to get out of the way of trouble. But, if you are already being tested by some adversity, you must hold to your convictions. There's no going back."

For those who found themselves overwhelmed by the political forces which swept over their lives, the final option was to join the army. Close to the front, in the desert region of the north, a young southerner sat uncomfortably with his Arabic-speaking comrades. The rapid conversation in Arabic went around

the room too fast for his "market Arabic" to follow. When tea is brought out and served — strong, steaming, heavily sugared in miniature cups — and there is a pause, the soldier explains, "I fought for Karmougué because I was told he was for my region. The FANT captured me and I saw that I should fight for them." He was stationed in Biltine — a town traded back and forth among the warring parties — to protect a food storage project run by the United Nations.

A few tracks in the desert lead to Biltine. For a few days it became the center of an emergency relief program. Around its central warehouse 300 people, perhaps a third of the town, are gathered. The army's detachment keeps them from coming too close to the UN representative and the teacher of the Koranic school is standing on the delivery platform. They are reading off a list of names chosen by the town committee to work: Yacob Moussa, Ousman Daoud Mahamat, Wadi Djimme . . .

Chalk writing on the large door reads, "Vive les FANT pour que vive le peuple tchadien." By 7:00 a.m. the sun is starting to heat the exposed white building. By mid-day, temperatures will exceed 50 C. Work begins with fifty men unloading 150 tons of grain. The crews start with incredible energy and zeal. As the sacks are stacked, the rows form staircases so that each successive row is piled up to the roof. As the stairway steepens there is only one worker whose stick-like legs and knees swollen by hunger, will not permit him to carry his 50 kg. sack to the top. Soon, the first lorry is completely unloaded and a great cheer goes up among the crew.

"Most of this food is for us soldiers." The southerner paused. "I was baptised by the priest of Moundou. Look, here's my baptism card." He pulls out a slip of paper from his wallet, stamped by the Catholic Mission in Moundou. "It's okay because Jesus had his army too," he says.

Over the past nineteen years, Chadians have learned to live as a migrant people. Mirroring the political situation in Chad, there is no one response to the war. There is no one single allegiance that can unite them. In the face of a war that has lasted the length of a generation, everyone has tried to protect only what is immediately at hand — life and a few possessions. There is an assumed impermanence to any cease-fire.

For the churches, the preoccupation struggle has been to "preach the Gospel" in this chaos. Two things seem to ensure this mission in the near future. Pastors have learned to set up tents in refugee camps and continue their work under the worst of circumstances. Secondly, the church is tied to the family structure. Departing from the unusually strong Biblicity of the churches one elder explains, "You have to be married to listen to the Word of God."

Many, like the soldier in Biltine, are torn between the authority of the church, the government, the village system, Islam, and the leaders of private armies. They, like the soldier, can ask themselves, "I'm a long way from home. What do I do now?" Or, as another Christian observed, "How can a country that has only known war, become a country of peace?"

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Robert Oliver (PhD Princeton) Economics
Thayer Scudder (PhD Harvard) Anthropology

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Business and editorial correspondence should be addressed to:

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